

Top dogs ruling our beef industry

Peter Weekes | 30th March 2011

A SMALL group of producers and processors, many of them foreign owned, control the Australian beef industry, secret voting entitlements obtained by The Northern Star reveal for the first time.

Many of the nation's beef producers have long complained that the voting structure of the Meat and Livestock Association (MLA) meant the top 50 players could out-vote the rest of the industry.

However, until now there was no concrete proof of this, as the MLA has consistently refused to reveal the number of each company's votes.

The secret entitlements from 2008 obtained by The Star show while a full-time Northern Rivers cattle farmer with an average 350 head of stock has less than 1600 MLA votes, Australian Agricultural Company has a massive 555,533.

Swift Australia, owned by Brazilian-based JBS - the world's largest meat company - has the second-most entitlement of 504,045 votes.

"I don't view that as fair or democratic," said Sydney-based lawyer and beef industry advocate Norman Hunt.

"What it effectively does is disenfranchise grass roots producers, who feel they don't have any influence or ownership of the MLA."

It is understood a small number of the largest vote holders have recently raised concerns about the unequal representation within the MLA.

MLA general manager of communications David Peach yesterday rejected suggestions the voting structure favoured the biggest players.

"The information that you have (voting entitlements) is not public information, but irrespective of that the allegation that the top 50 can out-vote the rest of the membership is not true," he said.

"We actively encourage every-one to participate and vote, but some choose not to."

Mr Peach said votes were allocated based on each dollar paid in compulsory levies, however, once a certain threshold was reached the number of additional votes was reduced. The MLA has 47,500 members.

The MLA was set up by the Howard Government to conduct research and promote the consumption of beef. It is funded by compulsory levies struck on farmers and processors based on their number of cattle.

The \$5per cow levy generated \$163.4 million last year, up \$4.2 million from the previous year.

However, many farmers say the organisation is failing in its stated duty, favouring certain companies with research grants, as domestic consumption per capita has plummeted from 41.3kg in 1997 to under 34kg in 2009, according to ABARE.

Farmers have also been hit by falling prices. In September 2005 the Eastern Young Cattle Indicator was \$4.15 per beast. It hovered around \$3.50 for six years before reaching \$4 last week.

This is despite a claim by critics that the MLA spent \$800 million on marketing over that period, which has been disputed by Mr Peach.

Page MP Janelle Saffin raised the issue in Federal Parliament last month, describing the voting structure as "problematic".

"I can understand why those at the top - the 'top dogs' as I call them - may feel some sort of proprietorial rights, but I understand even more why the small dogs and the local family farmers and levy payers feel disenfranchised and disempowered by this," she said.

The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs Committee was also critical of the undemocratic structure of the MLA and the industry's peak councils in its 2002 report into the industry.

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Since then, it has only gotten worse, the chairman of the Richmond River Beef Producers Association, Dr Ian Fielding, said.

"There is no clarity and no transparency at all," he said.

"Our members feel totally disenfranchised, so don't even bother registering to vote because they know it won't change anything, even though they have to pay the levy."

MLA's TOP 50 VOTING ENTITLEMENTS (2008)

- AA Company 555,533
- Swift Aust* 504045
- Rockdale Beef* 263,723
- Australian Country Choice 263,176
- Oakley Holdings* 252,040
- Elders 225,551
- North Aust Pastoral 193,521
- H.W Greenham & Sons 191,531
- S Kidman & Co 164,748
- Georgina Pastoral Co 160,305
- Nolan Meats 152,309
- Teys Bros Holdings 138,834
- Swift Australia (Southern)* 129,491
- Grant Garey 129,160
- Farmworks Livestock 122,885
- Consolidated Pastoral* Co 117,464
- Stanbroke Pastoral 114,505
- Graeme William Action 112,441
- GRM International* 111,791
- Heytesbury Beef 103, 719
- Laglan Pastoral 98,743
- Rangers Valley 93,088
- MDH 90,723
- Peter B Nilon 81,648
- Garrison Cattle Feeders 80,697
- Jodie hay 75,902
- Lachlan Paterson 75,009
- Richard Hughes 73,452
- Laird Morgan 70,392
- Twyham Pastoral 69, 153
- John H Speed & Margaret Speed 69,069
- Lloyd Pastoral 65,608
- Mort & Co 63,989
- Sandy Maconochie 63,820
- Thomas Kenneth Brinkworth 63,227
- Ogilvie Group* 62,054
- Hacon & Sons 61,486
- Smithfield Services* 60,759
- Pegela 58,409
- Kia-Ora 56,709
- Bill Harris 55,019
- Andrew Herbert 53,432
- Clyde Argiculture* 53,281
- Brendan Menegazzo 53,187
- Baines River Cattle 52,247
- Midfield Pastoral 51,690
- Gary Polkinghorne 51,021
- WR Carpenter 50,995
- Tasmania Feedlots 49,597
- Darren John Frankel 49,458

* denotes foreign ownership

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